

**Keeping On**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
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**Readings**

Matthew 5:1-10

<sup>5</sup> Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

<sup>2</sup> And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup> “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup> “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

<sup>7</sup> “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup> “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

<sup>9</sup> “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons<sup>[a]</sup> of God.

<sup>10</sup> “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The Task of the Religious Community, by Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

## Sermon

“Siyahamba”, which we’ve just sung, was composed over sixty years ago and quickly became an iconic freedom song in the midst of South Africans’ long struggle for freedom. During the last twenty or thirty years “Siyahamba” found its way into North American hymnbooks, including ours.

“Siyamba”: “We are marching...”

As for marching: the African American poet Elizabeth Alexander reflected recently (in a “New Yorker” article) on her experience as the inaugural poet at Barack Obama’s first inauguration. Washington is Alexander’s home town, and returning for the occasion of the inauguration led her to recall the 1963 March on Washington, to which her parents had taken her in a baby stroller, “because,” she writes, “sometimes marching is what you are supposed to do.”

So, she sat at the inauguration near the new president, with her father, now white-haired, at her side and wearing a button he had kept from the March on Washington: “The button had a white hand and a black hand clasping, and read, ‘March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.’”

Alexander writes that she:

...held the word “freedom” inside of me on the stage as I waited to read.  
Freedom. How would we know it? What would it feel like? Who gets to have it?  
What do we do without it? How do we know inside when we are free?

Well, hundreds of thousands of women and their male allies marched in Washington yesterday, and hundreds of thousands more rallied and marched in other cities across the nation and around the world, including in Boston – where many Old Ship members and many more Unitarian Universalists were part of the crowd... as I was.

“Because sometimes marching is what you are supposed to do.”

The march in Boston (like the hundreds of other marches around the world yesterday) was meant to be a non-partisan statement of solidarity with and for people in our nation who have too often been marginalized because of the color of their skin, their immigration status, who they love, their religion, their disability... and marching in support of values and issues of religious freedom, human rights, climate justice, racial justice, economic justice, reproductive justice, human dignity, democracy, freedom.

Now, I’m not assuming that I know who everyone here this morning voted for, or that I know what your position is on this or that political or social issue. We of course have differences among us.

But I am assuming – otherwise why would you be here – a shared fundamental commitment to the equality and dignity of every person. And at root that’s what these marches were about.

Will a march change anything? Has a march ever changed anything?

Maybe we should ask veterans of the 1963 March on Washington, who could not then have imagined a black president in any of their lifetimes... maybe we should ask

the people of Poland or the Czech Republic who took to the streets and brought down the communist regimes...

Progress when it comes to civil rights and human rights and freedom knows its setbacks, that's for sure – voting rights for example are still all too uncertain in all too many communities of color. But we have indeed come a ways... *and* we are, as the old spiritual has it, “never turning back... never turning back.”

Instead we are keeping on. We *must* keep on.

How do we do this?

We could do worse than to take some initial guidance from our two readings this morning.

The beatitudes give us typically seemingly paradoxical teachings from that poet and mystic and activist Jesus. Including this:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall inherit the earth.”

Or, as the more radical Luke has it:

“Blessed are the poor, for they shall inherit the earth.”

Well, we may want to say, “Really?!”

The lesson might be this – as the Franciscan writer and teacher Richard Rohr reminds us: change, real, lasting change in the direction of more freedom and more dignity for all, change that benefits the poor and the marginalized, most often comes not from the top, but from the bottom. This is of course the lesson not only of Jesus' words, but of his life. Jesus, as we know, hung out with and healed not those with political power, but those with little power, those who lived on the margins of society.

So, we can look at the legislative achievements of the Civil Rights era, for example, and it may appear as though those changes came from the top, from the halls of Congress and the office of the President. But none of that – none of that – would have happened without agitation from below, from people marching, from people boycotting, from people breaking unjust laws.

Equal marriage declared the law of the land by the United States Supreme Court? Would not have happened except that a clear majority of the American people had already come to the conclusion that equal marriage rights were right and just. And how had they come to that conclusion? Because of the thousands and thousands who demonstrated and agitated and lobbied for that change, who courageously came out of closets and showed their neighbors that they were pretty much like their neighbors and posed no threat to anyone's marriage or way of life... so the culture changed, and the highest court in the land simply ratified that change.

And do we think the Dakota pipeline would have been delayed, and maybe will be re-routed, and just maybe will never happen... do we think any of that would have been possible or conceivable without the hundreds of members of tribes from across the nation, then the additional hundreds of allies gathering and standing their ground at Standing Rock?

It is not, in other words, incidental that we march – or just gather and stand our ground together or sit by one another's sides... not incidental at all when we are moved to march or gather.

Yes, and critically important to remember, marching alone will not change the world or the nation. Letters, emails, lobbying, along with daily speaking up and speaking out on the issues that matter to us and on behalf of and in defense of those who are threatened by new waves of intolerance and bigotry and hate. But marching – however imperfect the gathering (not as diverse as we would have liked, more negativity than we may have wished) gets us going, keeps us energized, keeps hope alive.

And I want to say this. The marches yesterday or something like them would have been absolutely necessary too had someone else become our president – because change must indeed begin... and continue... and be supported... from the bottom. As our outgoing president affirmed in his farewell address, the most important office in the land is not the office of president, but rather is the office of citizen. This being so, we are never granted the luxury of sitting on the sidelines when it comes to the issues of the day, particularly issues concerning the well being of those Jesus called “the least of these”. Our new president declared that it is the people who have the power – may it truly be so.

But... then... after the march, after the signs are put away... how do we stick with it, how do we sustain our energy?

This brings me to the second reading, from my colleague in ministry, one of our Unitarian Universalist African American clergy, Mark Morrison-Reed.

Mark affirmed, as you heard, that “The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all.” He then went on to affirm that this leads us naturally to work for justice and brings us to know that in that work, in that marching, in that writing, in that lobbying, in that civilly disobeying... we are not alone. In that spirit he concludes:

The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

Our strength to keep on.

This is not an abstract idea. We incarnate this idea, we give it life every time we gather in religious community:

Simply gathering in this room every Sunday helps to “unveil the bonds that bind each to all.”

Sharing joys and sorrows here every Sunday in this safe space of love makes manifest in our hearts and sometimes through our tears those bonds.

Exploring the spiritual wisdom of the ages whether here in our Meeting House or across the street in the Parish House parlor or for the young people in their classes helps us to deepen those bonds, hopefully even to learn to *experience* through shared or individual spiritual practice our interconnection with, our interdependence one with one another and with all life.

Together serving a meal to our homeless brothers and sisters, whether at the Friends of the Homeless holiday party or at Father Bill's, further strengthens our bonds of connection with one another... and, widening the circle, with those in our community who are without a home.

Lobbying at the Statehouse or writing letters or sending emails for climate justice under the leadership of our Green Sanctuary/350 group: again the connections with one another strengthened, and this on behalf of all those on the planet being affected by climate change, most especially the poorest of the poor, those living at the margins – literally on the edge of encroaching desert or rising sea. Our bonds of life are with each and every one of them too.

(And parenthetically but of critical importance, climate change is an issue even more than others that cannot wait, for the temperature continues to rise, the atmosphere continues to warm... unless and until more is done... no matter who sits in the oval office or walks the halls of Congress.)

So... keeping on when the forces of reaction to many of us seem ascendant, and when crude, hateful, misogynist language has for many been “normalized”?

By keeping together.

This is indeed why marches matter – not because a march all by itself will change those in power (though now and then it does...) but because a march empowers those with little power, empowers and inspires us to keep on.

And this is surely, as Mark Morrison-Reed reminds us, why our community of faith matters and why our Unitarian Universalist values matter, articulated in our principles affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person, affirming the spiritual and political importance of the democratic process, affirming goals of justice and peace, affirming our place in the interdependent web of all life.

We cannot know what the future may bring, but we can know this: That the future is not a given, not already written for better or worse. Instead, what the future of our nation and our world will look like next year, four years from now, or for the next generation and the next, will depend on how we, bottom up, shape it now and tomorrow, and the next day, and next year... shape it through our words, shape it through our emails and petitions, shape it through our serving, through our marching, through our walking together through our sitting side by side.

My friends, whomever you each voted for, we will keep on together because we must, because, as we heard last week in the spirit of that Unitarian abolitionist Rev. Theodore Parker and the prophet of justice Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we – all of us together – are the ones who together can bend the arc of the moral universe in the direction of more justice, more peace, more kindness, more compassion, and more love.

So must it be